

## FIFTH LECTURE

by Maria Montessori

*We include the ninth chapter of Education and Peace by Maria Montessori (1949) to draw attention to the relationship between peace and sustainability. Nature is an integral part of peace studies.*

The education that will lead the way to a new humanity has one end alone: leading the individual and society to a higher stage of development. This concept involves many factors and may seem obscure, but it becomes clearer if we realize that mankind has to fulfil a collective mission on earth, a mission involving all of humanity and therefore each and every human being. This concept may enable us to set a definite goal for our efforts. But what can this mission of humanity be?

Is this mission the predominance of one nation over another? The power of the people? Industrial or cultural progress? And what will the individual regard as his personal mission? Ensuring that he and others have the means to survive? Ensuring the possibility of securing an education? It would seem that above and beyond these goals, which have to do with the interests of specific individuals or groups, there is something that involves all mankind and perhaps even the universe itself, creation, cosmic harmony.

This ‘something’ might be considered as involving a religious ideal. But what I should like to discuss is the possibility that science may have a predominant role to play in helping us discover this single universal mission.

It is possible to consider the life of the creatures of the earth from a single point of view, and I would like to make a few remarks about the modern study of geology and evolution.

The most interesting, and indeed almost awesome, fact resulting from such study is that the earth is a creation of life. Life created rocks and soil, and it is life that sustains the harmony of the earth. Yes, the earth is the handiwork of living things. The oceans are kept in constant chemical balance by living things, and living things also maintain the purity of the air.

All creatures who live on earth have a cosmic role to play. The maintenance of life on earth depends on many species, each one of which has a

special, specific function. Animals feed and live and reproduce; each one has a life-cycle that fulfils a special role in relation to the life of other species. Everyone knows, for instance, that the disappearance of one species in a certain place upsets the balance, because the lives of all species are inter-related. Life therefore can be regarded as an energy that maintains life itself.

I would now like to pose a question: Does not man also have a cosmic mission to fulfil on earth? Is it conceivable that this being who has such great intelligence, who is the worker par excellence, has no part to play in the labor of the cosmos?

Human energy, too, has appeared on earth to undertake and fulfil a specific mission.

It is quite evident that man has a mission. He has extracted hidden wealth and marvelous energies from the bowels of the earth, and he has created a superworld, or, more precisely, a supernature. As he has constructed this supernature little by little, man has also perfected himself and made the natural man he was into a supernatural man. Nature is a domain that has existed for centuries, and supernature is yet another domain, which man has gradually constructed.

Contemporary man no longer lives with nature, but with supernature. An animal can procure its food directly from the earth, but man is dependent on other men. How many men labor so that the bread we eat may reach our mouths! And fruit that comes to us from a faraway place may represent a vast organization of men, a formidable and strict organization, that holds human society together.

We must be aware of this organization if we are to evaluate properly certain widespread ideas that find expression in a number of slogans: ‘Let us return to nature.’ ‘Let us become one with nature.’

The life that some call ‘artificial’ is mankind’s supernatural life. Our way of life is not artificial, but rather the product of labor. If we did not make



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such a distinction, we might be inclined to say that even the way of life of certain animals is artificial—that of bees, who ‘artificially’ produce honey, for instance. Man is a great worker, capable of creating a supernature through his labors.

But we might now ask ourselves: if animals labor so joyously, why do men not also take delight in their work? Man should be much happier than animals. His unhappiness is proof that there must be errors inherent in human society and in the supernature that humanity has constructed. Man must labor not only to support himself and his family, but also to become an instrument of something great and awesome—not only to serve his individual interests, but also to serve humanity as a whole. From this point of view, the history of humanity becomes very interesting. As we study man from this perspective, we witness first his effort to explore the earth and extract its riches and then his effort to explore the heavens and master the energies of the intangible, the infinite, the limitless. An enormous, immense human conquest! And yet man today considers mere physical survival a problem.

Man is not conscious of his mission, nor of the heights that he has reached. Humanity has fallen sick, like an organism suffering from a circulatory disease; man is weak and unhappy.

Yet he continues to pursue his irresistible mission, and humanity is now united as one single nation.

And man, that feeble and unhappy creature, may be cured if he so wills. He need only open his eyes, rectify his errors, and realize his powers. When we say that man must intensify the means of communication and interchange available to him, we are pointing to a goal that he cannot attain immediately. Humanity must first be convinced of the urgency of attaining this goal. Man must be educated. It is true that education can create a better kind of man, but this is a vast undertaking. It is a labor that may well take a long time, but it will nonetheless be brief in comparison with the work that man has already accomplished.

The first thing that must be done is to construct an environment that answers the needs of young people. What has been done to date with regard to that period of human life that precedes maturity? What has been done for children, for young people? Practically nothing, or at any rate very little. Unlike animals, who build extensively for their young, man, the intelligent being who labors with his own hands, has failed to build on a similar scale for his progeny. What has the world, with its wealth

of great constructions, with all its comforts, done on behalf of children? It is not enough to love in an abstract way; we must begin to do something concrete, something practical—to construct the supernature necessary for the life of children and young people.

I would like to review briefly what we have done along these lines.

We have constructed, first of all, an environment providing all the little things necessary for the life of children. The child has not said thank you, but he has revealed to us the hidden treasure of man's soul. And this knowledge of the human soul, of its grandeur and power, represents both a warning and a hope for us.

Let us therefore continue our efforts! Let us construct an environment for children and young people; the thanks we will receive for so doing will be the enlightenment we need to see all the errors inherent in the supernature that we adults have created only for ourselves. We must build something new, not offer older children the same things we offer the young ones. Miniature objects and utensils no longer satisfy seven-year-old children. They need other things. The four walls of a 'house'<sup>1</sup> become too confining; older children need to go out and explore the world. They must have broader social horizons. Man feels a great need to make genuine efforts, so as to measure his own worth; the Boy Scout movement has partially answered this need. The idea of organizing young people is not an error. The mistake arises when the most intimate needs of the individual young person are not satisfied.

It is time now to correct these errors, to bring about a great reform, to offer young people the means necessary for their development and the enhancement of their personalities.

This task cannot be entrusted to private efforts alone; it is society as a whole that is called upon to fulfil it. It is of vital interest to the state to organize the life of young people. The child by the age of twelve should already be taking an active part in social life; he should be producing, selling, and working, not in order

to learn a trade, but because working means coming into contact with life, participating in the building of supernature. These young people should engage in economic transactions, learn the value of money, and take conscious part in productive activities.

Objects made carefully by hand have today been replaced by articles mass-produced by machines, a change made necessary by the fact that men's lives proceed at a more and more frantic pace. But handicrafts, which produce beautiful objects, and which society is now attempting to revive, could well be entrusted to young people. Let us hope that the art of fine craftsmanship is not lost simply because machines exist. May young people be given the possibility of continuing to lovingly produce beautiful things! And the creative spirit of young people can accomplish many other things as well. Botany, for instance, requires a keen eye and accurate judgement. Young people can become passionately involved in doing calm, serene, beautiful work that enables their young personalities to develop and find worthwhile goals. If young people at a certain point



Courtesy of Scripps Montessori School, San Diego, California

<sup>1</sup>The Montessori environment for children between two and one-half and six years of age is called 'House of the Children'.

are called upon to take an active part in the life of humanity, they must first feel that they have a great mission to accomplish and prepare themselves for it. They must have the chance to meditate upon it a little. We call this period 'the period of the desert'. Christ himself as he emerged from childhood went off into the desert before beginning his great mission. The man prepared in this way will fulfil his mission faithfully and consciously.

The young person today is urged to study, to buckle down, to conserve his time, to get ahead in the world. Poor thing. When he has completed his studies, he knows nothing of social life, and he feels lost and forsaken. Why should he have worked so hard? Why should he have studied, if books are no longer of any importance?

I cannot discuss the subject at greater length. I will simply say that as we see it, man must be inspired



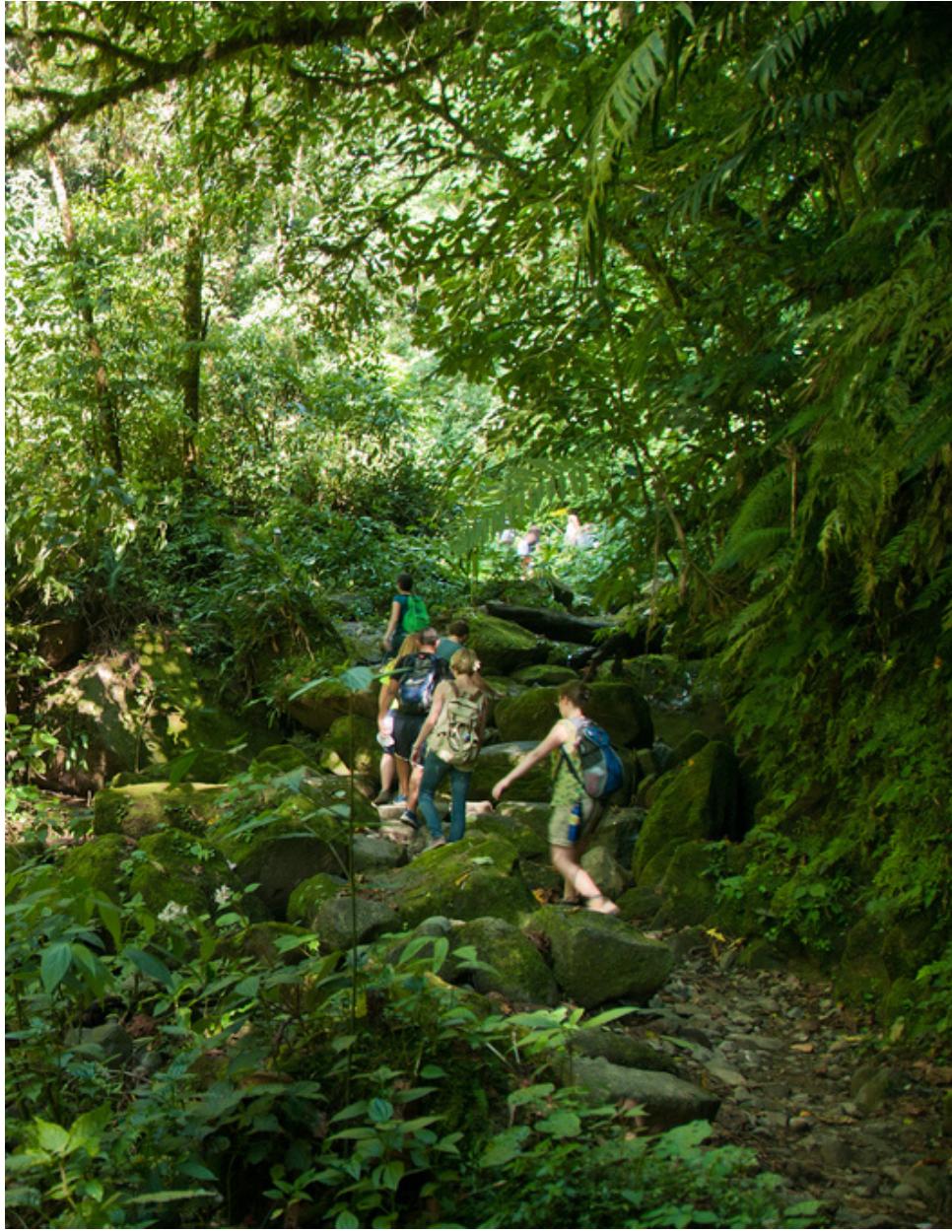
Courtesy of Montessori de la Condesa, Mexico City, Mexico

to seek universality until the day he dies. Man thus prepared, conscious of his mission in the cosmos, will be capable of building the new world of peace.

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